

ENTERING THE ORDINARY

Hilary Hart

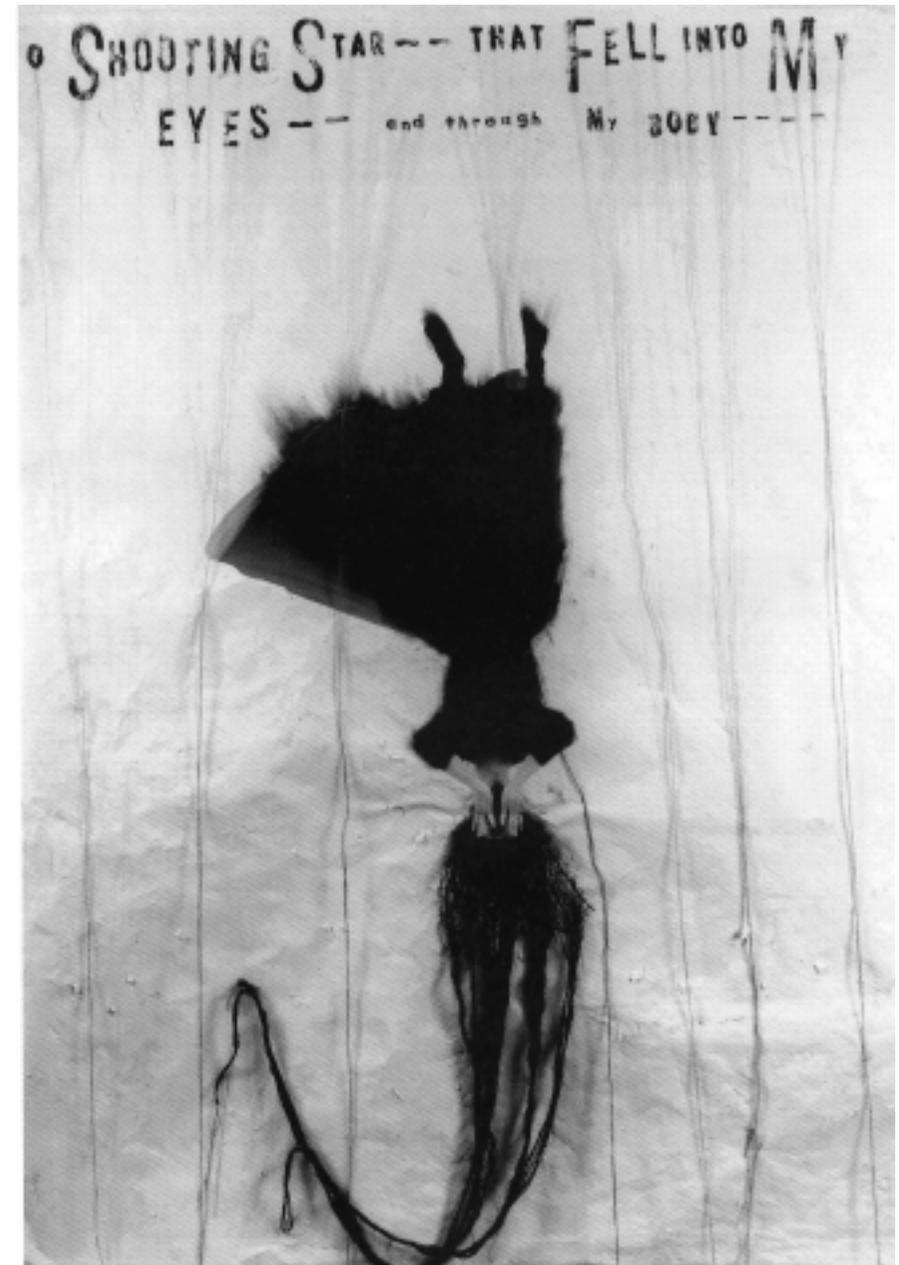
FROM THE MOMENT I MET MY SPIRITUAL TEACHER, A SUFI SAINT,

he brought me to states of union that convinced me I was home forever, and filled my heart with an almost unbearable sweetness of belonging. He promised me realization of the Truth, and he gave me everything I could have ever wanted.

I lived near my teacher for six years, working as his editor and writing my own books. I thought I was home, where I would live forever—by his side, helping him in his work. My devotion to him was so deep I was certain it held the key to my love for God. So I was shocked when he suddenly told me to stop looking to him for the Truth. He told me to leave him for six months, and look for God in my dog, Pearlle.

Where would I go for those months? How would I live without my teacher's nearness? And how could my dog take me to God? These questions spun around in my head fueled by panic and anguish.

My teacher had warned me of this years before. One day while walking the streets of our little town, he stopped and looked at me with tears in his eyes. "The time will come when you will have to let me die," he said softly. I never forgot that warning. But when the time came for me to leave



LESLEY DILL

"FALLING GIRL," 1997, THREAD, OIL, CHARCOAL, PHOTO ON PAPER



LESLEY DILL
"GHOST EYES," 1997, THREAD, OIL, CHARCOAL, PHOTO ON PAPER

him behind once and for all, I did not feel prepared.

They say that when a disciple meets her teacher her life begins anew. This is how it was for me. When I was taken to my teacher's meditation group for the first time I knew my life would never be the same. It was as though I had been an unanswered question all my life and finally found the answer.

Spiritual love is so hard to describe, "Love is a stranger and speaks a strange language," wrote Rumi of the love that ultimately annihilated his ego and dis-

solved him in God. I wanted a love that would not rise and set with my petty needs and desires but hold steady like an eternal sun and awaken me within its own brilliance.

When I met my teacher I had been in a doctoral program studying psychology. I dropped out of school immediately and with his encouragement moved to the small town where he lived. I meditated with him daily and walked with him on the ridge behind the meditation center. He promised me that my life would focus on our work together. I was filled with a devotion I believed would never end. My experience on the path was stamped with such a complete outer nearness and inner intimacy with him that I was horrified when the day came when he sent me away to be alone with Pearlie.

The idea that Pearlie could show me anything at all about God would have made me laugh if I wasn't so sad about having to leave my teacher. She was the least spiritual creature I could imagine. She was neither noble nor graceful. She was not intelligent. She was pear-shaped and had scraggly hairs sticking out of her face which almost always held remains of the previous meal. Her breath discouraged closeness.

I had found Pearlie in the pound in Denver. The shelter worker brought her into the adoption room after I had visited with a smart, light-brown Australian shepherd puppy who tempted me with his alert willingness to please. In contrast, Pearlie did not seem particularly interested in pleasing me. She was three years old, stubborn and slow, sweet and soft. The shelter worker said she had not been treated well, and this was evident in her shyness. I liked how calm she was. And she seemed like an angel, with wide-

open eyes looking far away, un-earth-bound and a bit sad. Her ears stood straight out from her head, trailing strands of hair, looking like angel wings trailing light.

Pearlie was not beautiful but something about her vulnerability and stillness attracted me right from the start. I named her Pearlie because of her white coat, which was tinged on the ends with black. She looked just like a pearl.

When I met my teacher, I forgot about Pearlie. I just wanted to be with him. Pearlie's simplicity and slowness held no sway in light of so much love and power. The more time I spent with my teacher, the more Pearlie was left in the shadows of my spiritual longing. When my teacher told me to leave him and be with Pearlie, I reluctantly packed my car and drove with her to my family's summer cottage on the Connecticut shore.

It was not easy looking ahead at months with Pearlie in an empty summer community away from my teacher. I had some writing projects to work on, and my mother lived nearby, but the dullness of the coming winter scared me. In my teacher's absence I struggled against loneliness, boredom, and even anger. It was hard to love Pearlie through all my resistance. I wanted spiritual life, not life with a dog!

ONE FALL DAY, MISSING THE LOVE and excitement of life with my teacher, I looked over at Pearlie lying on her blue bed in the afternoon light. I could see Long Island Sound through the sliding glass doors behind her; ships were sailing slowly by. Pearlie was asleep, her paws twitching in her dreams. And in the subtle emptiness of that moment I understood Pearlie symbolized everything I had avoided since meeting my teacher.

Everyone has a closet in his or her psyche with a box all tied up at the back, holding the one thing she wants to forget. For me, this one thing was ordinary life. Everything I valued seemed to lie far beyond the ordinary. It was life—simple life—that I feared the most. Dull, un-engaging.

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In other words, Pearlie.

When I noticed this irony, I had to laugh. Pearlie was slow, simple, and a bit dull. She didn't even have the enthusiasm most dogs had. Pearlie embodied aspects of my life away from the spiritual energy of my teacher. But I knew from years on the path that a seeker must face all she fears and disdains before she can enter the doorway into the divine oneness.

My time with my teacher had awakened a spiritual love and awareness deep inside me. But maybe it was time for that energy to flow fully into life, into Pearlie, into even the densest dimensions of myself. In the ancient text "The Emerald Tablet" Hermes wrote of the journey of consciousness:

It ascends from Earth to Heaven and then returns to the Earth,

So that it receives the power of the upper and lower.

Was relating to Pearlie my descent, the way I would bring my love and energy

down into Earth and realize this unknown power that unites the higher and lower?

Sitting at my dining table contemplating this question I watch Pearlie sleeping. Just sleeping. I shook my head, and couldn't help but smile. She was everything I did not want. She was the oppo-

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site of what I expected and hoped for. But I loved her.

This was the strange truth—that momentary universal laughter. I loved her. Through the resistance a spark of hope flashed in my heart. This was the next step. I needed to surrender to even the most ordinary dimensions of life and I was being given a way to do it. I did not love Pearlie as much as I loved my teacher, and the love was so different, but I did love her. And in love there is surrender.

I had only to stick to this love and let it lead me where I needed to go.

Slowly, over the long winter months alone with Pearlie, I began to feel something changing. What was emerging remained enigmatic and easy to miss, just like Pearlie.

I felt that a different sense altogether was needed to see what Pearlie was trying to show me: perhaps the wild love I felt for my teacher masked a simpler and silent twin.

One day deep into winter I sat on the

edge of my bed with Pearlie lying near my feet. I closed my eyes and let myself drift beyond the parts of myself that were jumpy with pain and need. There in the darkness I felt around for my love for Pearlie. I felt it and heard it here and there, like breezes and whisperings, or echoes and warm rain.

I had to be still and very patient to feel it. I could not force myself there, but I could let myself touch something and be drawn deeper within. In those moments sweet currents seemed to stream through the air and I could ride them like a bird carried by the scent of wildflowers across a meadow.

This new love seemed to have its own ways and would not be bullied or ordered around. Just as Pearlie was slow and heavy, this love seemed to be part of a slow flow—like the deepest part of a wide river. To feel it, I had to stop thinking. After all, Pearlie was one of the least intelligent dogs I had ever known. In order to really be in my love for Pearlie, I had to be still—just like her.

This love that recognized Pearlie's beauty was like a secret hidden deep inside of me. When this love approached, it soothed me into rest. I became so quiet, melting into dark silence with nowhere to go, nothing to do.

Looking outward, I saw Pearlie's beauty everywhere. All life was lit with a soft glow. the birds, the trees, and every heart was alive with love.

THAT WINTER I ATTENDED TO PEARLIE. I looked in myself for love, and then I looked to her and let the love flow. I wrapped her in love and kept her warm with love. When I told myself Pearlie was the most important thing I tried to make sure my doubts could not express their complaints. I held a space so that when

Pearlie decided to tell me her secrets, I would be able to hear her.

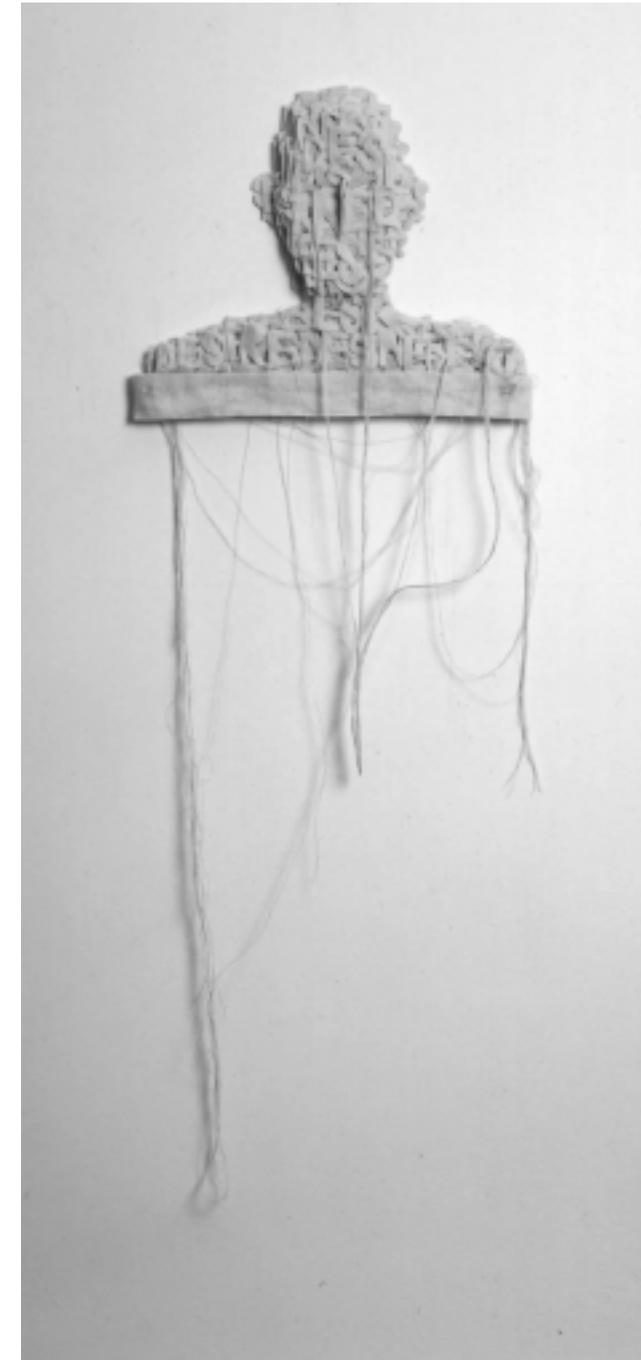
I spent a sometimes sad and sometimes peaceful five months on Long Island Sound among the vacant summer houses of our small community. Pearlie, ten years old then, seemed to come more alive than ever, wandering along the sea wall and down to the beach or across endless lawns of thick grass with no fences to hold her back. During those months away from my teacher I felt the peace between us grow, and I loved Pearlie more than I ever had.

WHEN THOSE MONTHS WERE ALMOST OVER and I began to plan my return trip back to my home and my teacher and the work I hoped would be waiting for me, a call came from back home. A friend said I was not to return. My teacher had indicated that he did not want to see me and that I should have known better than to think of returning.

The devastation left me weak and barely able to breathe. All my hidden hopes and subtle expectations were destroyed completely by the hurricane of absence that tore through my consciousness.

I surrendered further to Pearlie then because she was all I had left. And how I loved her then! How grateful I was for her presence, for her simplicity, for her state of being that invited me inside like a hearth invites a traveler who had been too long in the desert winds.

Not long after I received that final message from my teacher, Pearlie showed me divine presence in my own being. Petting her in the darkness of the morning, a small bit of light coming in through a crack in the shade dancing off those strands of fur on her ears which



LESLEY DILL
"DESIRE," 2000, FELT, GLUE, THREADS



"PEARLIE ON THE ROAD."

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were pulsing with her heartbeat, I experienced the power of the love she had been trying to reveal. Love came through my fingers, through the palm of my hand, through my own presence into her. There was no effort; there was no separation. Life, love, and awareness were all at present with Pearlie and me. We were together in a state of oneness in which what was needed could be given without effort.

I remembered how difficult it had been to love her when my teacher was present and when my love for him was much more appealing. Now there was no effort needed. Love could begin to flow where it was needed, not only where my ego's desires directed it.

IN SUFISM THERE IS A SAYING, "I belong to

those whose hearts are broken for my sake." My teacher's absence broke my heart. My teacher's absence tore away my attachments and left me vulnerable to who I was. I experienced the state of being part of life itself, reflected in the simplicity of Pearlie.

In that simplicity, in that presence, I am completely alone and yet everything is included.

A few weeks after showing me that I was finally beginning to awaken in the oneness at the core of life, Pearlie suddenly died. The devastation of this new absence left me alone and yet more present than ever.

Now, living in New York City, working in an ordinary job as office manager for a fashion designer, I experience a strange meaninglessness to even the words absence and presence. In the beginnings of my surrender, in the wholeness of life, does it really make a difference? For in freedom, in love, states of absence and presence are simply two faces of the same Beloved.

Still, I sometimes wish Pearlie were still alive so I could feel her warmth and simple sweetness. And of course I long to see my teacher again. I am passing through the second winter without him. Sometimes I wonder if he has forgotten me. But then I remind myself of what is most important. And in my own remembrance of what has been given, does his absence matter?¶